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BACCALAUREATE SERMON

1892



Columbia College
in the City of New York

THE DEBT OF POWER

BACCALAUREATE SERMON

TO THE

CLASS OF 1892

BY

THE REVEREND MARVIN R. VINCENT, D.D.

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I am debtor both to Greeks, and to Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the foolish.—Rom. i., 14.

The place of the Apostle Paul in history is beyond challenge. His greatness is conceded on all hands. To the faith and devotion of the earlier apostles he added superior intellectual endowment, learning, and personal power. When he wrote, at Corinth, this letter to the Romans, he had already been for over a score of years a Christian apostle, and was recognized throughout the Church in Asia and Europe as a leader. His counsel was sought, his rebukes were feared, his services were acknowledged, and his personal friendship was valued and cherished. Already he had made that record of travel, toil, hardship, and persecution which appears in his second epistle to the Corinthian Church, and to which few autobiographies can furnish a parallel. Perhaps it would have been only natural for him, who had served so many, to ask now some little consideration for himself. Perhaps he, who had done and borne so much, might have been pardoned for thinking that he had mostly discharged the obligations of his apostleship, and that the Church had incurred some obligation to him; but nowhere in Paul's writings can there be found a hint to this effect. On the contrary, the feeling

under which his entire ministry is prosecuted finds expression in our text—namely, that he is under obligation to men of all classes, nationalities, and grades of culture. “I am debtor both to Greeks, and to Barbarians ; both to the wise, and to the foolish.” The world has a claim on me. What I give it, I *owe* it.

How fully and literally he justified that statement his familiar history testifies. His power was placed at the service of all men, without regard to nationality, social position, or culture. He addressed himself to the Stoics and Epicureans at Athens, and to the Asiatic purple-seller and the brutal Roman jailer at Philippi. He had a ministry of healing for the household of the dignitary at Malta, and for the crazy slave by the Gangites. He had a word of wholesome wisdom for Agrippa, and put heart into the desperate sailors on the corn-ship. He did not shirk contact with the superstitions nor with the speculations of Phrygia. He reasoned before Festus and harangued the howling mob at Jerusalem. He served the slave Onesimus and his master Philemon.

This is the truth which invites our attention this evening—*The debt of power, under all its phases, intellectual, social, personal, religious.* Power is a debtor. Power owes. Power is under obligation ; and the greater the power, the heavier is the debt.

The proposition involves a principle which finds its proper place at a critical point of life like the present, where preparation is about to merge into practice. The direction, the effectiveness, the success of life

will turn on the acceptance or the rejection of this principle. In other words, life will be one thing to him who enters it saying, "I owe myself to the world"; and quite another and a different thing to him who enters it saying, "The world owes everything to me."

This issue has made a good deal of history; for history is largely occupied with the fight over the individual's assertion that men were made for his use and pleasure. It is at the bottom of the great struggle of the democratic idea for recognition, of many a popular revolution, of many a summary dethronement. It is the wind which has driven many a social wave, gathering and mounting before it over leagues of dreary waste, to break at last resistlessly upon the so-called divine right of kings.

It is not denied that power in the individual, the endowment of genius, the wealth of knowledge, the gift of leadership, must move and direct the masses of mankind. It always has been so, and always will be; but the point at issue is not the fact of individual mastery, but the conception and the use of it. The fact that the popular intellectual, moral, and social level is raised or depressed by the individual sage, saint, philanthropist or king, is the very fact which makes these debtors. Carlyle says that the king, the *König*, is the *Canning*, the man who *can*. If we stop with that, we have gotten no farther than that might makes right; but that is not all. Real kinghood is determined not by the possession, but by the direction of might; depends not on right being might, but on

might doing right. The man may say, "Because I can, I am absolved from obligation, and all are under obligation to me." He may seize the throne, but he is not king. Or he may say, "Because I can, I must : because I can more than other men, I owe the more to other men." He is the real king.

This is the principle by which Paul's whole life and work were propelled. It was not an original principle with Paul. He took it from Christ, who not only uttered, but incarnated it. It was He who was "in the form of God" before eternal ages, who was made in the likeness of men, and came to them saying, "I am among you as he that serveth." Under the inspiration of such an example Paul writes to this mother-city, the mistress of the world, there where such multitudes have laid their gold and their lives and their manhood at the feet of a Tiberius, a Caligula, a Nero, and says, "I want not your gold, your service, your adulation. I ask but to serve you. You owe me nothing. I am debtor, both to Greeks and to Barbarians ; both to the wise, and to the foolish." Seneca would have shaken his head over that. Vedius Pollio would have laughed at it as he ordered his slave to be thrown to the lampreys. Augustus, the gentleman, the literary man, would have echoed the laugh as his minions nailed his slave to the mast. "Debtor to that slave, forsooth ! Did not the wretch kill my favorite quail ? Is the slave any better than the quail ? The slave is for me ; not I for the slave." Fancy Claudius or Nero reading Paul's letter to Philemon ! "Only hear this fool, interesting himself in a runaway slave, and

a thief at that! See here! Calls him brother! Absolutely gives his note of hand for the amount stolen!" True, all true. Laugh on, Nero! Here is a man beside whom you, poor, pampered, brutalized wretch, are little more than a beast, putting his magnificent manhood at the service of this poor Onesimus. Debtor to a slave! The world has been slowly coming round to Paul's view. It cost a fight even in this nineteenth Christian century; but social sentiment is with Paul to-day, and not with Pollio and Augustus.

Culture is as aristocratic as titled nobility. Knowledge is power, and power of any kind is a temptation to arrogance and selfishness. These are no less real because they do not assert themselves with whip and sword. The point is not that culture imparts a conscious superiority to ignorance. It must do that. It is rather that it is too often regarded as absolving its possessor from all obligation to ignorance and rudeness, and as conferring the right to develop culture as an end unto itself. Culture tends to isolation. The higher and wider it is, the more difficulty it has in finding affinities. Culture leans toward the ideal rather than the actual. That is well if the actual be not sunk in the ideal. The highest ideal can be worked out only through the actual. The tendency of culture is to ignore uncongenial facts in striving after an ideal which shall do away with the facts; and to build up isolated, ideal personalities which are as irresponsive to the world's piteous appeals as is the exquisite effigy on a sarcophagus to the tears which

bedew its marble feet. Culture has a right to its affinities, but not to insist on its affinities to the exclusion of its obligations ; not to seek only appreciative response and to refuse to strike its hand into any hand which cannot return its secret grip. Because the ideals of culture are pure and truthful, it does not follow that they may not be wrongly pursued. Spiritual culture may be prosecuted in a way to make a very dubious kind of saint. It is right to love beauty, yet beauty is constantly made the minister of sensuality, and æsthetic sensibility is not infrequently allied with hardness and cruelty.

Culture, knowledge, taste, practical skill—any form of power is impaired and perverted to the degree in which it misses the element of ministry, holds itself absolved from debt to mankind, and regards mankind as its debtor. This is the truth which you will do well to face as you face the world, and step out from the quiet halls of study to take your place and your part in the world. Culture is obligation. Knowledge is debt. The world is creditor, not you. A talent belongs in the market-place, not in a napkin. That man, in Christ's parable, who buried his pound, would not see that principal meant interest. He found it out to his cost when the day of reckoning came. In the popular conception mastery is the opposite of service and excludes service. In the Christian conception mastery means service. The ideal king is the one who serves his people best. You know who it was that threw this truth into living and eternal embodiment, as He girded Himself with a towel and washed the

feet of His disciples, saying, "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."

"For He before whose sceptre
The nations rise or fall,
Who gives no least commandment
But come to pass it shall,
Said that he who would be greatest
Should be servant unto all.

"And in conflict with the evil
Which His bright creation mars,
Laid He not aside the sceptre
Which can reach to all the stars?
Of the service which He rendered
See on His hand the scars!"

Opposed to this ideal is the exaggerated and false estimate of the significance of possession, the belief that life consists in having. Possession may be nine points in the law; it is only one point in the Gospel, and that not the principal point. There possession is always regarded as a means, not as an end; as aggravating responsibility, not as lightening it; as a call to work, not as a summons to rest. Possession is ordinarily conceived as merely having and keeping. You have so many dollars. You have so much knowledge of biology or classics or physics. You have so much skill to build or carve or paint. That is yours. Nobody has the right to say how you shall use it or that you shall use it at all. You hold the key to your own treasury. To demand it of you is highway robbery.

If you choose to impart any portion of what you have, that is your own business. It is a favor which you condescend to grant. It is pure, gratuitous generosity on your part. If you do not so choose, that is equally your own business, and no one has the shadow of a right to complain or to remonstrate. Your own personality and all that attaches to it are sacred. You are a law unto yourself ; you are your own.

"You are *not* your own," replies Paul ; and the flat contradiction is Christ's no less than Paul's. Drop your plummet down into those apparently simple little Christian aphorisms, and it strikes very deep on a hard bottom of absolute and eternal truth. This, for instance, "No man liveth unto himself." Do you think that is merely a moral commonplace—a thing to point a sentence, a rhetorical generality which will not stand analysis? I tell you, nay ! No man liveth unto himself. No man *can* live unto himself in the nature of the case. It is an *essential* impossibility, a philosophic law. Nothing in the universe is or can be a purely isolated unit. Every object involves and includes an environment, from a man down to a mollusk. The environment and the thing belong and go together. The existence of the thing implies the existence of the environment ; and its normal existence implies adjustment to the environment. To separate them is not to separate two things, but to cut asunder a whole. Man belongs in the universal frame of things as represented by nature and society. His existence as man involves relation to other men—active relation, mutual relation, his action on them as theirs on him.

If he refuse either he becomes abnormal. The integer of society is made up of units. The withdrawal of a unit impairs both the integer and the unit. Of a little French town on the Adour the guide-book says, "It has a population of one thousand and one." The sum total of the population is not complete until that "one" is in its place. The "one" needs the "thousand," but the "thousand" also needs the "one." Hence, the fact of possession is modified by the fact of relation. Throw out relation, and you impair both the range and the tenure of possession. You cannot truly possess, and evade the relation of your having to those who have not. They are not entire until you complete them. You cannot truly live and merely possess. You are out of line and out of touch with God's great order if you keep yourself and its belongings to yourself. If you merely accumulate, if you merely grow big in fortune, knowledge, culture, deftness, or anything else, you are a monstrosity, a deformity. Society has to form a knot round you as nature does round a break in a bone. Society has to take you in by some exceptional process, and to get round and over you, as the roots of a tree accommodate themselves to a rock. You have your share of right in mankind, but for the same reason mankind has its share of right in you and yours; and its right is an inherent right, a natural right, like the right of the earth to the sunshine or of the river to the streams—the right of organic connection.

You are debtor to your environment. It is entitled to draw on you at sight, and its check is indorsed by

God. According to the current phrase, to "pay the debt of nature" is to die. That is the only way in which some men ever pay it. Nothing in their life becomes them like the leaving of it. There is a popular type of religionism which concentrates its attention principally upon the life which is to come, and consoles itself for its stuntedness with the prospect of celestial perfection. The sooner such people get into the life which is to come, the better. Perhaps they will find consolation there. At any rate, society will gladly give them a receipt in full for the sake of getting rid of them. To pay the debt of nature is to live and serve.

The thing from which the world is suffering most to-day, the troublesome quantity in the social equation, is simply the fact of the refusal of one section of society to recognize its debt to the other; the attempt to compound the debt by the payment of a certain percentage; the protest by the upper side against the claim of the under side. Dives is willing to throw scraps to Lazarus, willing even to send him now and then a full meal; but Lazarus is to understand that this is a pure gratuity, that he has no right in the case, and that it is only through Dives' generous condescension that he is tolerated at the gate at all. Do not understand me to overlook or to depreciate the noble acts of individual charity with which our own city, not to go farther, so abounds. I am speaking of general tendencies, social drifts; and I affirm that a large section of even so-called Christian society has not yet gotten hold of the idea of gift and duty

and sacrifice as a debt instead of a generous concession. Ignorance, degradation, stupidity do not justify the protest of wealth and culture against their claim. They constitute the claim, and emphasize it. "I am debtor, not only to the Greek, but also to the Barbarian; not only to the wise, but to the unwise, too." Their claim may be exaggerated and unreasonable, it often is; but when these elements are sifted out there is still a claim. They are unpleasant facts, but the chief end of man is not to be pleased. They are troublesome, but man is born to trouble, not only as inevitable, but as something to be assumed and accepted as a factor of life. They are burdensome, but Christ calls men to bear burdens. One of the great mistakes of people is the assumption that they are entitled to pleasantness, and that unpleasantness of any kind is an infringement of their right.

The obligation of power to weakness, of culture to ignorance, of skill to helplessness, is, as I have tried to show, a natural debt, an obligation inherent in the organic connection of things; but the natural obligation is emphasized a hundred-fold by Christian principle, Christian love, and Christian enthusiasm. Very few people, I take it, have grasped the whole meaning of Christ's gift of Himself to the world. Certainly there are not many who have taken His ideal in its full dimensions as their own standard of obligation. The current Christian conception of the individual's debt to the world includes a large measure of personal reserve. It is an accepted Christian principle that a man owes something to his race; but along

with this goes the principle that a man owes something (usually the larger share) to himself. The peculiarity of Christ was that He ignored the latter element entirely, and gave His whole self, His best, His life to the world, and thus backed with His own practical, divine sanction His injunction to all His followers—that which constitutes the very essence and key-note of Christianity—to deny self, to say that self is not, and thus to follow Him.

Possession and impartation are not contraries. They do not exclude each other. Just as mastery means service, possession, in the highest sense, means impartation. "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth, and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, and it tendeth to poverty." Some one once said, "What I kept I lost ; what I gave away I have." You do not truly possess without giving. You never know anything so thoroughly as after you have taught it to some one else. You are never so fully possessed of your own thought as after you have given it voice and expounded it to others. You have not all that there is in your money until you have made it help and lift some one. The value of power is in what it will do. You are very poor if you have only power and not its product.

Moreover, power, like everything else, depreciates by hoarding. Nothing in God's universe can violate its own law and not suffer from the violation. Issue, use, application are the laws of power. If your reservoir does not give out its water, the water stagnates and breeds pestilence and fouls the reservoir. A man

may hold money, but he holds with it a shrunken soul. You may build up a big self on symmetrical lines, filled out with learning, threaded with the sinews of power; if that is all, you will be smaller and meaner and more contemptible than was that rough fisherman who was crucified head downward for Christ's sake.

You know the law of the conservation of force. You know that force does not achieve its utmost and best by retaining its original character. Conversion is a law of force. Suppose you convert so much soap or leather or sugar into a college, a church, a hospital; do you not see how those vulgar bulks have been transformed into active ministers; how they have lost their material character, and have passed up into the sphere of moral and spiritual forces? Do you not see how your original material possession has gathered round itself the best human affections, and has initiated new and beneficent forces, how it has not only multiplied itself beyond the power of figures to state, but has taken on a quality which is divine?

And so it is with knowledge. Suppose you heap up knowledge. You know all the languages, and all the philosophies, and all the sciences. What then? If that is all—if your knowledge and culture do not go out from you, are not worked at their highest power to form and stimulate society's thought, to lift its ignorance, to expose and fight its popular fallacies—you are nothing better than an unloaded lumber-wagon.

This man Paul was well stocked with knowledge. He had a large and vigorous intellect to begin with. He had all the Rabbinical lore that Hillel could give him. He had gathered something from the Greek schools of Tarsus. Let him go back now to Tarsus, and spend the rest of his days brooding and musing beside the Cydnus and poring over Rabbinical rolls. He would have escaped a good deal no doubt. He would not have known the inner prison and the stocks and the scourge at Philippi, nor the howling mob round the stairs at Jerusalem, nor the wrecked cornship at Malta, nor the chain and the Prætorians at Rome, nor the block and the axe outside the Ostian gate. He would probably have died quietly in his bed. I doubt not his work would have been done by some one else, for it had to be done, and "God has no necessary men"; but as to Paul himself, there would have been one more learned man at little Tarsus—Saul the forgotten Rabbi instead of Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. Saul without Paul's vast heritage of power and love and blessing and spiritual stimulus and helpfulness, which is still rolling up its accumulations beyond all power to tabulate them. "I am debtor." Was not Paul the greater, was not his power the greater for his acknowledgment and payment of that debt? Do not forget that debt is also opportunity; and that if payment of the debt of power takes much, all out of a man, it gives back far more than it takes. Virtue went out of Christ to heal her who touched the hem of His garment; but Christ had no less virtue, and had besides a glowing,

grateful, happy child of humanity laying her love and allegiance at His feet. Truthfully says Emerson: "A wise man will extend this lesson to all parts of life, and know that it is the part of prudence to face every claimant and pay every just demand on your time, your talents, or your heart. Always pay ; for first or last you must pay your entire debt. Benefit is the end of nature. But for every benefit which you receive a tax is levied. He is great who confers the most benefits. He is base to receive favors and render none. In the order of nature we cannot render benefits to those from whom we receive them, or only seldom ; but the benefit we receive must be rendered again, line for line, deed for deed, cent for cent to somebody. Beware of too much good staying in your hand. It will fast corrupt and worm worms. Pay it away quickly in some sort."

I give you, then, this truth with which to face the world's work and warfare. You are not your own. You owe yourselves to the world. Whatever birth, fortune, education may have given you, society has a right to draw on it. You are not an isolated unit. Whether you like it or not you are an integral part of society, and your power and function are as truly tributary to society as the hand or the foot or the eye to the body. You may refuse the tribute, and society may let you alone and pass you over. So much the worse for you. You will lose more than society will ; and though society may let you alone, your own swollen and deformed self will not let you alone, but will turn upon you like a

demon and tear you. The story of Frankenstein is a sermon.

Power only enhances responsibility. Ability only emphasizes duty. Endowment means service. Have you thought something? You owe the world your thought. Circulation is its birthright. Not that the thinker is always welcomed by society. It is quite possible that you may owe it a debt of which it would gladly quit you ; which it would much rather you should not pay. It is quite possible that you and society may differ as to the nature of the debt : that is to say, you may think that you owe it to society to speak out, and society may think that you owe it to keep still. They thought so in Jerusalem when Christ told the truth about the scribes and Pharisees. The Church of the sixteenth century would have paid Luther to stay quietly at Erfurt. Savonarola was not a favorite at Florence, and certain modern Christian thinkers have not found the Church over-grateful for their speaking. The exaction of payment may come from the stress of your own soul rather than from without. In any case you are debtor, to tell what your thought has found, if your thought strikes at a social falsehood, or knocks out a window in a moss-grown wall of social or religious custom which keeps out the light. This is a wonderful age for a young man to begin his career. If there is much behind him there is much waiting for him. The hard questions are not all settled yet. The practical problems are not all discovered yet. The professions are full, but there is plenty of room for men of the right mould, for

men who have real power and are not afraid to use it. Manly holiness and purity will find plenty of occupation. There is a good deal yet to reward earnest truth-seeking on all lines. Mind is busy, and the old is being shaken and sifted, and the new is crowding to the front. It is an age of immense material resources, of rapidly increasing knowledge, of tremendous forces, both for good and for evil. If a young man can go out into such a century without a call to do and to give and to suffer ringing through his soul and stirring his blood, he is a juvenile mummy, and his true place is the cemetery.

The greatest danger to many of our youth lies in their fathers' wealth, and in the accompanying fallacy that the removal of the physical necessity of service is the removal of all obligation to service. It is quite within the power of some of you to spend your life amid books and pictures, to lounge in the shadow of sphinxes and pyramids, to nurse æsthetic fervors at the beauty of Italy or the mountain glory of Switzerland. Quite within your power to dawdle away life at the club and to attain eminence in the waltz and at tennis, and to leave the world to stumble along on its blundering, tearful, weary course, while you

“ live and lie reclined

On the hills, like gods together, careless of mankind ;
For they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurled
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly
curled

Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world :
Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,

Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and
fiery sands,

Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying
hands—

But they smile."

Oh, place for a moment this sensual, selfish, rotten Epicurean conception of divine felicity beside St. John's picture of the girded Christ washing the disciples' feet, and dropping His tears over the tomb at Bethany. Place side by side Paul chained to his prætorian guard, and Nero with lyre and painted face, master of the world, and singing to the rabble in the theatre. Which is the nobler? Which is the richer? Which best fills out the divine ideal of manhood? Remember that intellectual power is not unselfishness. Remember that literary and artistic pursuits, while they may be beautiful ministers to humanity, may be only ministers to self. Remember that there may be an intellectual and æsthetic sensuality, no less than a physical and gross sensuality. You are debtors. The worse the world is, the more it needs the good man. The more ignorant it is, the louder is the demand on the Christian scholar. The place of the true man to-day is *in* the world, not *above* it. "Above it all." The words linger in my memory with a sad sweetness, as they fell from the lips of my dear and honored friend, Roswell D. Hitchcock, one of the choicest spirits that ever adorned this city of ours—a man whose culture was as fine and rich as his spirit was brave and his life consecrated. He was speaking to a large audience

on the subject of Christian education, and depicting in his graphic style certain social menaces which were looming up on the horizon like thunder-clouds. Not many years and their bolts would strike. "But," said he, and he paused an instant, and his lip quivered and his clear voice broke, "I shall be above it all!" He was in less than a year, but he kept *in* it all until the time came for going above.

That is the watchword now: In it all!—to fight, to purify, to enlighten. In it all, yet not of it all. In it all; yea, deep in it, so deep as to have leverage for an upward thrust. For above the mire is the sky; above the gross vapors are the stars; and there is large room between earth and heaven for him who will raise toward heaven and light. If there is an attraction from heaven, it must be supplemented by a pressure from beneath. If society is to be pulled upward, it must also be pushed upward; and he who would lift must first go down. "I am debtor." The man who said that, said also of tribulation, persecution, nakedness, peril, sword: "*In* all these things we are abundantly the conquerors." Above them all is to come later. "*Henceforth*," wrote the apostle from his prison, "there is laid up for me a crown." Only he who bears himself well and faithfully in it all, as part of all, as debtor to all, may hope to be peacefully and forever above all by and by.

It is with deep feeling that I stand here and speak these words to-night. Memory runs back over nearly forty years to the hour when, like you, I stood on Columbia's threshold, and looked forth upon the

world. How sadly sweet is the recollection of the bright mornings when the quivering leaves of the old sycamores threw their shadows on our Xenophons and Homers! How the faces of my class rise up before me! How widely scattered they are! How many have finished their life-work! And the good and learned men at whose feet I sat—King, McVickar, Anthon, Renwick, Hackley, Schmidt—all gone! * But the sadness which waits on such memories is offset with the pride and joy which wait on the fact that Columbia's second century is far richer than her first; that Columbia is a far larger and grander factor in the life of this city and country, and is fraught with a richer promise to the future, than the Columbia of my day; that she recognizes her debt, and is setting herself to pay it with usury. God bless our old college! The best wish which her best wisher can cherish for her is that her existence and her work may be justified in the efficient and fruitful manhood of her sons. That she may be not a mere splendid aggregation of libraries, laboratories, and sages, but a perennial fountain of Christian culture and social influence and blessing; a perpetual manhood-making force which shall be felt in every heart-beat of the generations to come.

* One is left, Professor Henry Drisler, "*clarum et venerabile nomen*."



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